

Allegory as Experiential Communication:  
Metaphorical Mapping between Bunyan's Emotions and *The Pilgrim's Progress*

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### Abstract

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is a classic example of allegory. While literary critics tend to minimize allegory's value as a mode, *The Pilgrim's Progress* demonstrates a proclivity for genre-transcending techniques that encourage looking at allegory in a new light. Namely, parallels between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1660) show Bunyan drawing on deep personal emotion to fuel characterization.

## Allegory as Experiential Communication:

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Allegory as a literary form rose to prominence in the Middle Ages (c. 1100-1450) (Lewis 44). Its success was largely rooted in the religious expressions of the day; as Lewis points out, allegories came easily from a mind accustomed to interpreting religious texts allegorically (61). It is unsurprising, then, that as such religious practices have faded, allegory has fallen into distinct disfavor, a fall hastened in large part by the views of Goethe, Coleridge, and other philosophers and Romantic thinkers (Fletcher; Machosky). The allegory now appears undesirable because it seems largely two-dimensional, as if it is nothing other than an essay masquerading as fiction, a piece of unfair trickery on the part of the allegorist.

*The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), John Bunyan's allegory for the Christian believer's journey from conviction to ultimate salvation, has arguably grown to be the most famous allegory of the last four centuries. In many ways, however, its very identity as an allegory has contributed to many dismissing it to a certain extent, and many others recasting it as a non-allegory proto-novel.

This thesis will argue that *The Pilgrim's Progress* accomplishes more than the didactic work of communicating the conceptual framework of Christian growth. Bunyan's own life experiences provide the emotional basis for many of the metaphors presented in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. While *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not a metaphorical representation of Bunyan's life, it nevertheless gives a unique look at how a writer's life can inform his work.

To accomplish this argument, the thesis will first define the often misunderstood genre of allegory, then discuss briefly the ways meaning is communicated in allegory, provide an overview of John Bunyan's life, and finally evaluate a number of instances in which Bunyan's experiences can be seen in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

### **Defining Allegory**

It is difficult to succinctly define allegory because much of the term's meaning depends on nuances that will be briefly explored in this thesis. *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* terms it "writing with a double meaning" or a "work or figure . . . encoded with meaning intended by the author or a higher spiritual authority" (Copeland and Struck 2). A typical allegory takes the form of a narrative. The allegorist uses characters and events to develop ideas not ordinarily related to the narrative pieces used, so that a knight comes to signify the good man, a maiden virtue, and a dragon vice; when the knight kills the dragon and rescues the maiden, the allegorist says that the only means for the good man to achieve virtue is by conquering his own vices.

This thesis will use the terms *circumstantial meaning* and *intended meaning* to differentiate between the two trains of thought present in an allegory. In the example above, the *circumstantial meaning* would be the more literal action within the story: a knight kills a dragon and rescues a maiden. The story's *intended meaning*, on the other hand, would be its deeper moral.

This definition applies to some extent to a wide array of works in myriad genres. Fletcher points out that even many nonfiction pieces feature the allegorical mode (3-4). The art of saying one thing in order to communicate a meaning beyond what is said is not

limited to strictly imaginative works, and Lewis goes so far as to say that allegory is “of the very nature of thought and language” (44). Allegory is nonetheless ordinarily used in describing poetry or prose of an imaginative nature; this more limited sense is the one typically intended in critical analysis.

Central to the nature of allegory is that its intended meaning is not inherent to the words used. Rather, the intended meaning is brought from beyond the circumstantial meaning and placed into it. An image is crafted specifically to embody a transcendent or intangible reality (Lewis 44-45). The circumstantial meaning plays host to a greater, abstract something in order to properly communicate it.

That allegory is studied now as a largely didactic mode pushes its reader to consider it in terms of its lesson or moral. Using the word *meaning* in this thesis thus risks conjuring a simplistic model in which the reader thinks of the allegorist’s message without considering the broader implication *meaning* can carry. Machosky writes that allegory includes two distinct phenomena, or realities, in a single literary space, thereby defying the human tendency toward creating one-to-one relationships between the senses of language (1). For example, it is not via a single passage of Dante’s *Commedia* that the reader is able to image God; instead, reading the work in its entirety gives her this experience, or meaning (13).

Lewis says that “every metaphor is an allegory in little” (60), but allegory’s meanings entail much more than mere metaphor. A metaphor ties a simple concept to a simple image; in the “watched pot that never boils,” one sees the fruitlessness of worrying over what cannot be controlled. This metaphor truly is a miniature allegory, and

demonstrates the key concept of dual meanings, or that the allegory's intended meaning coexists with while being independent of its image. In something so small as a fable, one refers to a mere moral or lesson; in an allegory, those words fail to capture the full extent of the intended meaning.

The allegory refers to a belief system outside itself that is sufficiently robust and fully formed to exist independently (Berek 130). Allegories cannot sum up the entirety of the belief system the author intends to communicate because the intended meaning is something broader than the mere information communicated. As Fish points out, "the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance—*all* of it and anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say—that *is* its meaning" (qtd. in Luxon 165). Bunyan knew this, and himself drew attention to the fact that what he was trying to accomplish—namely, that saving grace in Jesus Christ would work in his reader—could not be done through his own words; all he could give in *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a shadow of the experience that imparted the truth (Luxon 178).

That the intended meaning of Bunyan's allegory cannot be absorbed simply from the circumstantial meaning does nothing to nullify the intended meaning's existence. The doctrines of salvation and damnation in *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be stated separately from that story, as they are in numerous Christian theological and apologetic texts. Meaning is certainly closely connected with the story; it is not difficult to recognize a representational relationship between, for example, the roll by which pilgrims enter the Celestial City and the righteousness imputed to sinners by Christ's death. But Berek says

that allegory's intended meaning is "fully paraphrasable: stable in language other than the language of the literary work" (130). Just as the moral in the image of the watched pot's failing to boil can be spoken purely abstractly, the doctrines taught by *The Pilgrim's Progress* can themselves be spoken without any reference to swamps, castles, rivers, or giants.

The story of an allegory is thus itself freed from needing to play host to pure one-to-one correlations, and so, as Fletcher says, one can appreciate a fable's plot without at all grasping its intended meaning (7). To some, the fox and the grapes are merely that, as should be the case; if the intended meaning can stand alone in an abstract presentation, the circumstantial meaning must also be able to stand alone, or else it falls to pieces when taken at face value. This holds true for broader allegories like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which demonstrate the same power to please simply through their circumstantial meaning. As a case in point, many consider *The Pilgrim's Progress* a close predecessor to the novel because of its plot structure and narrative craft, which, as functional techniques, serve a literary purpose only within its circumstantial meaning.

It is sometimes difficult to imagine that the circumstantial and intended meanings can hold equivalent weight in an allegory, particularly when a given critical piece might focus on one to the exclusion of the other. As noted above, Machosky writes that "allegory . . . defies the logical constraint prohibiting the occupation of the same space by two things at the same time" (1). Many scholars, still operating within that logical constraint, draw the conclusion that, because *The Pilgrim's Progress* resembles the modern novel, it must somehow then be less an allegory. This is not the case. Allegory is



at its core a relationship between two discrete ways of thinking; the allegory and the novel are not mutually exclusive forms.

### **Allegory and Symbolism**

Just as the relationship between the novel and the allegory is frequently unclear, so can one end up confused when considering allegory and symbolism. In discussing the two modes' similarities and differences, one runs the risk of stumbling upon what Fletcher calls an "unhappy controversy" within critical circles (13). In short, how the two are related is not settled. Scholars hold varied and often contradictory views on the subject. This thesis will nonetheless propose the paradigm held by Fletcher and Machosky as best for understanding the interplay between these two modes that are both opposite of and closely related to one another.

Allegory and symbolism, as traditionally understood, are to meaning and image what arteries and veins are to oxygen and blood. Both modes involve the relationship between an immanent form and a transcendent reality, but they do so in apparently contradictory ways. The simplest statement of the two modes is given by Goethe, who wrote that allegory uses an image to show a meaning, while symbol finds a meaning in an image (Fletcher 13). In other words, the relationship between the circumstantial and intentional meanings in allegory is, in fact, intentional. The allegorist places the transcendent into the image, to purposefully communicate the transcendent with greater clarity. The symbolist, on the other hand, pulls from the image its connection to something transcendent, thereby giving the image greater significance. The relationship between the circumstantial and intentional meanings in symbol, therefore, is almost

coincidental in that the connection was already there, waiting to be found. Lewis puts it another way: allegory is the taking of the immaterial fact and making it visible, while symbol is the taking of the visible and making it immaterial (44-45).

These differing approaches to meaning result in an idea put forth by the Romantics, and widely held today: allegory is inferior to symbolism as an art form. Machosky argues that this was an unfounded prejudice that ought to be abandoned (10). The prejudice stems from perspectives like Coleridge's, who says that the difference between allegory and symbol is rooted in the scope of their broader meanings; in allegory, the entirety of the phenomenon (as he called the intended meaning) is contained within the image (Fletcher 17). As pointed out above, this is not the case, since allegory's intended meaning properly functions as its own system of belief that stands separate from and unconstrained by the allegorical form's bounds.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the history of allegory's fall from its position as a dominant literary form, there seems to be a connection between Coleridge's claim that symbol allows the idea of the phenomenon to continue existing beyond and transcendent of the image (Fletcher 17), and the belief that symbolism is superior to allegory. This apparent connection seems much more likely when one considers the ways Coleridge's view complements Goethe's earlier view that symbol and allegory are opposite ways of looking at meaning in image (Fletcher 17). In the Goethean model, symbol is organic, arising from natural connections between the image and its broader meaning, but allegory is contrived by someone who wishes to use image to convey a meaning.

Machosky, however, says that the differences between allegory and symbol are less drastic than this model proposes. Instead of being a separate and superior literary mode, symbolism is subsumed under allegory and contained within it; as a mode of communication, it is only possible through allegory (48). While symbolism does exist, it exists only as something that is. The image and the meaning can have a connection, but the moment that connection is put into words, it becomes allegory (179-180).

This is of course nonsensical within the Goethean framework, which divides symbol and allegory along the lines of authenticity versus artificiality. But this division is arbitrary. Machosky is saying that symbol is a part of allegory: symbol is the connection between the circumstantial and the intended meaning, while allegory is the expression of and interaction with that connection. The study of allegory, then, necessitates a concern for the way that meaning is communicated.

### **Meaning in Allegory**

Unlike with other forms of literature—or at least many forms of literary criticism—allegory’s meaning is inherently tied to the author’s intention instead of to the reader’s independent interpretation. While Machosky assumes throughout *Structures of Appearing* that allegory could be accomplished accidentally, without the author’s meaning to do so, common discussion of allegory assumes the intentional coupling of meaning with image; regardless of Machosky’s argument’s validity, this thesis is dealing with the common usage of “allegory,” since *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is allegory in the traditional sense of the word. The very nature of allegory is traditionally characterized by double meaning (Fletcher 313), which means that, contrary to Machosky’s assertions, the

text itself cannot be the source of an allegory's meaning. Allegory is incoherent without giving thought to at least the environment in which it was written, if not specifically the allegorist herself.

This is because allegory, as a form of communication, must be consciously undertaken by the writer: Dante wrote, "It would be a great disgrace to a man, if he should rime matters under figure and rhetorical colouring, and then, when he was asked, could not strip off that vesture and show the true sense" (qtd. in Lewis 47-48). The necessity of this intentionality to allegorical meaning cannot be overstated. (It is the reason the *circumstantial* and *intended meaning* are distinguished one from another.) The point of the circumstantial meaning, Fletcher says, is both to display the intended meaning and to cause the reader to properly interpret it as such (325). Thus, readers of allegory will entirely miss the true purpose of the piece unless they work to uncover its intended meaning.

This means that allegory exists separately from the reader's awareness of it. In certain political contexts, where citizens were punished for criticizing the government, a form of allegory developed wherein writers expressed criticism the government could not recognize but certain members of the citizenry could (Fletcher 7-8). An acceptable (perhaps even common) reading of a particular allegory might therefore result in ignorance of the piece's intended meaning. This does not mean that the piece is not an allegory; rather, it means the discerning reader must labor to discover whether a work's author intended to communicate something beyond mere circumstantial meaning. Berek makes a distinction between allegory whose authors sought to clearly convey its intended

meaning to all its readers and allegory the point of which was to obscure the intended meaning from all except a few worthy readers. Despite the obvious differences between these forms of allegory, he concludes that both forms of allegory ought to be approached through the same method of interpretation: "The reader is still trying to decode a meaning intended by the author. That meaning may be obscure. But saying that a meaning is mystical or mysterious emphasizes all the more that it is intention rather than actualized language that is being communicated" (Berek 122).

Even the term "language" is a misnomer when describing the work being accomplished in allegory, which is precisely Berek's point. There is rarely a one-to-one relationship between particular moments in the allegory and particular kernels of intended meaning. Rather, the intended meaning unfolds itself almost unconsciously to the reader of allegory, such that the experience of reading is itself the method by which the allegory communicates to the reader (Machosky 18). This property of allegory belies the notion that allegory is simply an expanded metaphor, at least insofar as metaphor is usually understood. Namely, as Crisp says, an allegory is not, at face value, always textually self-conscious of its intended meaning in the way most metaphors are: *amber waves of grain* openly links, through a linguistic device, grain fields with the sea. With the notable exception of naming conventions (such as in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, where the Giant Despair's name signals his representing the abstract concept of despair), actual linguistic metaphors within allegory are usually concerned with depicting the circumstantial meaning (333-34). The simple metaphorical sentence, *The birds were children's kites*, is not in an allegory pointing the reader to the writer's intended meaning.

Rather, it is helping the reader to better picture the imagery and events occurring within the allegory's fictional, surface account.

These factors—the intentional nature of allegory's subsurface communication, the possibility of reading allegory without recognizing its nature, and the non-linguistic connections between allegory's circumstantial and intended meanings—show that the interpretational burden in allegory rests on the reader, particularly in cases where the intended meaning is obscured, either unintentionally (as in Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*) or intentionally (as in Beckett's *Molloy*). Properly reading an allegory therefore requires a markedly different approach than reading other literary modes might. Whereas some methods of criticism sometimes lean heavily on the reader's perspective or contemporary cultural factors to interpret literary works, proper discovery of an allegory's intended meaning demands more than sole reliance upon manipulating a text with modern eyes. It demands the pursuit of the author's context and experiences so that her intention—and thus the direction in which her allegory is moving didactically—can be as clearly seen as possible (Berek 122).

This is ultimately the reasoning behind the use of "intended meaning" throughout this thesis. Numerous critical traditions exist whose methods extrapolate meaning from a piece with little or no consideration of the author's intentions. The text is viewed as its own discrete artifact, able to speak for itself. This thesis, without invalidating such forms of literary criticism, assumes that allegory especially possesses a meaning beneath the text that was placed there by the author and was, in fact, the purpose for which the allegory was written. The reader can absolutely extract other meanings from an allegory,

but the theory behind allegory presupposes an intentional communication by the author for the reader. Any other interpretation of the allegory besides the intended meaning, while perhaps valid according to a critical tradition, will therefore be incorrect from the standpoint of the allegory's purpose.

### **Rationale for Comparing Bunyan's Experience to *The Pilgrim's Progress***

Much has been said by other writers about how *The Pilgrim's Progress* is vastly more than a mere retelling of Bunyan's spiritual autobiography in a more refined and imaginative way. Bunyan himself details in *The Author's Apology* that the purpose of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is to reveal to his reader a picture of the one who sought and gained salvation, as well as the dangers faced along the way to salvation and the ones who thought they sought salvation, yet perished (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 9). In keeping with the method of allegorical interpretation stated above, then, a proper understanding of *The Pilgrim's Progress's* intended meaning is the growth and struggles of the Christian life.

Haskin observes that Bunyan seemed convinced that the Puritan Christian's quest for assurance of salvation through properly interpreting the Bible ought to culminate in the interpreter's helping her fellow-laborers on the way to their own interpretations (275). If this is true, then at least one purpose of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is to help its reader follow Christian along his journey to properly interpret the Bible. Whether consciously intended by Bunyan or not, this necessarily involved communicating to the reader the quality of Bunyan's experience in his own interpretive journey.

Many people use metaphors when trying to express what emotional experiences feel like (Fainsilber and Ortony 249). While it has already been stated above that allegory does not fit well a typical understanding of metaphor, Crisp does give a rough definition of allegory as “a super extended metaphor in which all overt reference to the underlying target has been eliminated” (333): in other words, hardly a metaphor at all as most would define it. The basic structure of allegory as a large-scale metaphor is helpful in exploring the ways in which Bunyan’s personal experiences shape his writing of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

This is not contradictory of the method of allegorical interpretation proposed; rather, it is complementary to that method. The proposal is not that Bunyan’s experiences underlie *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as its intended meaning; rather, the proposal is that Bunyan naturally incorporates his life into his allegory as the soil for many of its episodes and figurative turns. This is why so many have found strong connections between Christian’s journey and Bunyan’s own conversion story. Because Bunyan was a skilled writer, he could not help but incorporate his own human experience into the fictional account of Christian’s journey to the Celestial City.

The major reason for considering Bunyan’s life is therefore to gather moments whose emotional core can be seen influencing the presentation of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*’s circumstantial meaning. A synopsis of Bunyan’s life and his spiritual conversion—which formed the basis of his other still-famous work, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1660)—will be followed by a brief mention of his literary influences



(as necessitated by the philosophy of allegorical interpretation stated above) before the paper discusses some ways Bunyan's experience influences with his writing.

### **The Life of John Bunyan**

John Bunyan grew up in Elstow, a small village near Bedford, in southern England. He was born in 1628, likely in November.

The Bunyans were poor, albeit descended from a wealthy family who had once owned land (Harrison 3). Today's vernacular would label Bunyan's father a tinker: one who repaired pots and pans. Unlike many tinkers, who typically wandered about looking for work, Thomas Bunyan owned a cottage outside town (Harding 12-13); it was likely at this cottage that John Bunyan began learning the same trade, which was customarily passed down from father to son (McCreary 10).

Although Bunyan is today famous as a Puritan preacher and writer, he spent many of his youngest years in dissolution; he labels himself "the very ringleader of all the youth that kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness" (*Grace* 278; sec. 8). Although plagued as a child with fears of judgment and death (Harding 16), he was deaf to conviction and used bad behavior to block it out (Harrison 8).

In June 1644, Bunyan's mother died, and a month later his sister followed suit. Bunyan's father remarried in August (Talon 6). That same year, Bunyan joined the Parliamentary Army to fight in the Civil War of 1642-1651 (Harrison 8-9).

Upon leaving the Parliamentary Army in 1647, Bunyan returned to Elstow and took up his father's trade as tinker (Harrison 13). This period saw Bunyan also married; like many of the significant dates in his life, his wedding date is unknown (McCreary 16).

His wife Mary was a godly woman from a godly home. She was poor, and her dowry was only a pair of books: Arthur Dent's *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and Lewis Bayley's *The Practice of Piety* (Harding 18). These books, together with his wife's stories of her devout father, drew Bunyan to desire religion (Harrison 15; Harding 19). This led to his conversion, and he became a member of the Baptist Church in Bedford in 1653 (Talon 8).

Bunyan was called in 1655 by the congregation in Bedford to serve as a lay preacher (Piper 53); in the same year, John Gifford, pastor of the church in Bedford, died. Gifford's death was followed by Bunyan's wife's in 1658 (Dunan-Page xiv) and by Gifford's successor's in 1660 (Harrison 79).

Bunyan married his second wife, Elizabeth, in 1659 (McCreary 47), but their marriage was soon troubled by Bunyan's imprisonment. In 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne; shortly thereafter, the Act of Uniformity was written into law, which made it illegal for those who did not submit to the Church of England to preach (Harrison, 80-81). This included John Bunyan, who was arrested the same year.

Both Talon and Piper write that Bunyan was only imprisoned because he refused to abandon preaching: "He might have regained his physical liberty at the price of spiritual servitude: if he gave up preaching, he was told, he would be allowed to go back to his family" (Talon 9), but "for twelve years Bunyan [chose] prison and a clear conscience over freedom and a conscience soiled by the agreement not to preach" (Piper 56). Bunyan felt that, were he to abandon the charge he felt to preach in exchange for his

freedom, he would set an example that would justify his congregants' breaking under religious pressure (Talon 9; McCreary 51).

Choosing imprisonment was difficult, since Bunyan knew he was leaving his children and wife without his support; yet he remained in prison, working to make lace so that its sale could provide for his family (Talon 10; McCreary 67). The imprisonment proved profitable for him in other ways, as he wrote *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, his spiritual autobiography, in the same year he was jailed (Harrison 127-128).

King Charles signed the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672 which Non-Conformists (including Puritans like Bunyan) and Roman Catholics free to worship as they pleased (McCreary 69). As soon as Bunyan was released, he received an official license to preach, and did so until he was arrested again sometime in 1675 or 1676 (McCreary 70; Talon 11; Harding 123). While in prison, he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* (McCreary 71), which was published in 1678 (Talon 17).

### **The Spiritual Journey of John Bunyan**

Bunyan's was a life defined by the positive impact those around him had on his spirituality. Many pointed him to God for years before he finally converted to Christianity; it is doubtful that these witnesses to Christian faith did not inspire certain characters and events in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

One of the earliest encounters Bunyan had with religious fervor was in the Parliamentary Army. Among the subtexts of the Civil War was the belief that each side's case was righteous before God. Oliver Cromwell was a Puritan, and his army was full of religious zeal (Talon 7); during his days in the army, Bunyan was surrounded by passion

for the Bible, and his role in the Parliamentary Army would certainly have resulted in his owning a copy of *The Souldiers Pocket Bible* and *The Souldiers Catechism* (Harrison 11-12).

As mentioned above, Bunyan's first wife was a spiritual spark for him. Talon writes that Mary Bunyan's impact on her husband was far greater than just the spiritual books she brought as her dowry or the stories she told of her pious father. Her own life served as an example to Bunyan of what faith in God looked like (Talon 8). Bunyan's longing for religion was awakened; he set about making his life resemble what he thought piety should look like (Harding 19).

Bunyan was convicted by his sin when he overheard a few women discussing faith in Christ; this incident awakened a new longing in him for salvation (McCreary 23-24). These women and others in Bedford introduced him to John Gifford, who pastored the church in Bedford of which Bunyan would one day be a part. Gifford gave him spiritual counsel, assured him that he was, in fact, a Christian (McCreary 26; Piper 50-51), and eventually baptized him (McCreary 30).

These individuals walked alongside him in his miserable journey from conviction of sin to assurance of salvation. From his childhood, Bunyan was afraid that God would damn him (McCreary 11). This overshadowing fear, coupled with the preaching he heard as a child in Elstow, caused him to dream multiple dreams of hell and the apocalypse (McCreary 14-15).

Bunyan's initial conversion, as has been said, was to a form of outward moralism that resulted in his rapidly fluctuating between licentiousness and hypocrisy. One of his

great fears was that he must have already betrayed Christ so much that he could not be taken back after falling away (McCreary 20, 29).

It was not until he heard the thought, “Thy righteousness is in heaven,” that Bunyan realized that none of his works were enough to condemn or save him; only through Christ did his salvation come, and according to Harding, at that thought he had peace (48).

### **Literary Influences on Bunyan’s Thought**

The spiritual significance for Bunyan of Dent and Bayley’s works, given to him by his first wife upon their marriage, has already been discussed above. Another writer whose work shaped Bunyan’s Christianity was Martin Luther. This shaping came through Bunyan’s reading Luther’s *Commentary on Galatians* during his period of doubt. He says of that volume, “I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart” (*Grace* 310; sec. 129). Their commonality brought Bunyan great comfort, for Luther taught him that the Gospel was about God’s forgiveness of sinners.

Luther also emphasized in his writings that the question of assurance could be answered through merely searching the Scriptures (Runyon 82), which resonated perfectly with Bunyan’s predisposition toward a theological tradition that the Christian was required to diligently search the Bible for assurance that she was among those chosen by God to be saved (Haskin 264, 267-268).

This burden is likely why Bunyan felt only a need to study the Bible and those books that helped him to better understand it (Harding 178-179). His only formal

education was briefly in his childhood; he certainly did not hold any degrees in theology, which earned him even more the enmity of the established Church's clergy than he would have already had as a Puritan preacher (Piper 61). In fact, he boasted that his only theological education was from his Bible and his concordance (Piper 77). He rejected any obligation to pore over the writings of other theologians in formulating his theology; his language was therefore uniquely uninfluenced by other literary influences, defined almost entirely by the language of the Bible and the common speech of his day (Harding 179-180).

Yet, as Talon writes, there were clearly other influences on Bunyan's writing in his contemporaries and literary forebears. Before his conversion, Bunyan was an avid reader of fantasies, and extolled their virtues as entertaining reading. The influence of such fantasies can be seen in *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the Giant Despair, the fight with the demon Apollyon, the exotic festival of Vanity Fair, and other scenes and characters (20).

In utilizing such literary methods as emblems and characters, Talon points out, Bunyan was also drawing upon the conventions of his day. He utilized emblems—short passages of verse to comment on the earlier action—throughout *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Christian, Hopeful, Ignorance, and others were clearly inspired by the popular books of characters. Beyond this, Bunyan wrote most of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the style of a dialogue, which it is certain he gleaned in part from reading Dent's *The Plaine Mans Path-Way to Heaven*, a dialogue in which the protagonist Theologus discusses salvation with various other characters (19-20)

In addition to such concrete examples, there is the simple fact that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the last major allegory to be written in English. Lewis documents well the rise of allegory as the dominant literary form in medieval times, which means that Bunyan's work in following the conventions of allegory was clearly informed by those allegories which came before his. Talon writes that the work of two particular allegorists—Deguileville and Bernard—likely shaped Bunyan's own allegories (19). It is also fairly obvious that *The Pilgrim's Progress* shares family similarities with classic allegories like *Everyman* (1485) (Crisp 330). The very structure of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a journey narrative (which dates back at least to Homeric epics) shows that Bunyan was standing on the shoulders of a rich literary tradition that played an essential role in crafting *The Pilgrim's Progress*, whether he was conscious of that role or not.

#### **Examples of Bunyan's Experience in *The Pilgrim's Progress***

One of the most obvious correlations between Bunyan's life and his allegory is in the episode of the Slough of Despond, which bears a marked resemblance to the struggle Bunyan experienced in searching for the assurance of his salvation. Once Help pulls Christian from the Slough, the narrator asks Help why the Slough has not been repaired. Help's response is that "It is the descent whether the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin, continually run," and that the Slough is formed by the settling of "fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions" in one place. The way to avoid the Slough is via steps that have been laid out, which Bunyan labels in a marginal gloss as "The Promises" (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 15-16).

The burden upon Christian's back is what causes him to sink in the Slough. Haskin notes a connection between this burden and the duty Bunyan's theological tradition taught all Christians had: to interpret the Bible for themselves (261). If Christian's burden is to be understood in this way, then Christian's experience in the Slough of Despond is likely a communication of the way in which Bunyan struggled while he sought out the assurance of his own salvation. His journey from conviction to joy was marked by "fears" of his perpetual lostness, "doubts" as to whether God would accept him, and "discouraging apprehensions" that he had missed his opportunity to be saved. Although the Slough does not function primarily as an autobiographical description of Bunyan's struggles, as an image it does draw heavy inspiration from the emotions which Bunyan experienced during his period of salvific uncertainty.

This is especially clear when one considers multiple specific metaphors Bunyan uses in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. He writes that "sin and corruption . . . would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain" (297; sec. 84). This image, and the one from *The Pilgrim's Progress* of muck running constantly down a slope, strongly evoke one another. Even if the essence of the two images—putrid liquid constantly adding to already-present filth—were not the same, the logical connection between the two images is immense. The water running into the Slough of Despond must come from somewhere, and that source is found in Bunyan's heart.

Further, Bunyan describes himself as spiritually "some child that was fallen into a mill-pit, who thought it could make some shift to scrabble and sprawl in the water, yet



because it could find neither hold for hand nor foot, therefore at last must die in that condition” (*Grace* 329; sec. 198). When Christian falls into the Slough, he is unable to extract himself, despite his struggles. Only when Help appears and pulls him out of the Slough does he escape (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 16). These two incidents both feature a man who is stuck in water, weighed down by the burden of conviction such that, though he expects to be able to escape, he is unable to; without intervention, both Bunyan and Christian would have died in the Slough.

A full confirmation that Bunyan is drawing upon his own experience in crafting Christian’s experience with the Slough is that he describes himself being like “the horses” who push “towards sound ground, that yet stick in the mire” (*Grace* 344; sec. 250), much like Christian, who “endeavoured to struggle to that side of the Slough” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 16). Bunyan’s interpretation of the horses in the mire is that he was seeking to cling to the promises of God as a resting place (*Grace* 344; sec. 250); it is no surprise when Help explains the proper path through the Slough is by “The Promises” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 16).

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, then, Bunyan’s protagonist, Christian—with whom the reader is meant to identify—is a man unable to escape the perpetual running down of filth, weighed down by conviction, struggling to swim but sure to die because he cannot get to the promise that will give him a resting place. And in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan describes his own experience metaphorically as being unable to escape the perpetual bubbling up of filth, weighed down by conviction, struggling to swim but sure to die because he cannot get to the promise that will give him a resting

place. Bunyan is drawing here upon his own emotional experience to craft a vivid picture of the Slough of Despond for his readers.

A similar connection can be drawn between Bunyan's experience before attaining his assurance and the image in the Interpreter's House of the man in the cage of despair. McCreary describes an episode near the end of Bunyan's journey from conviction to assurance, wherein for two years he lived under a cloud of despair because he had allowed himself to give up Christ rather than endure suffering (29). In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the man in the cage—the one who professed faith—explains to Christian that he thought himself bound for the Celestial City until he sinned, gave himself up to temptation, and provoked God to such anger that he could no longer repent (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 29-30).

This directly mirrors Bunyan's period of despair. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* contains 339 sections. Fully 91 of these sections—over a quarter of the book's length—is devoted to the two-and-a-half years Bunyan suffered under the despair that he had given up Christ (312-331; secs. 139-230) when he thought he had forever sold out Christ and would suffer judgment as a result.

A particular detail is Bunyan's metaphor in his spiritual autobiography of himself "as one bound," as if his legs had been locked in "fetters of brass" (312; secs. 142-3). It is not until God delivers him from his despair that these fetters fall off (331; sec. 230). In this instance, it is apparent that the description of the iron cage containing the very sad man who looked, sighing, at the ground with his hands folded (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 29) is drawing upon Bunyan's own emotional experience of despair, especially as

Bunyan describes himself “moping into the field . . . like a man bereft of life” and “walking under a hedge . . . bemoaning myself” (*Grace* 312; secs. 140, 143). These two are the very picture of one another.

Further confirmation can be had from the caged man’s description of his own plight: “I have so hardened my heart, that I *cannot* repent” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 30). This line links the man in the cage with Bunyan so strikingly that not one of his readers who has also read *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* could fail to notice the similarity. A refrain throughout Bunyan’s struggle with despair in that book is a warning about Esau from the book of Hebrews (12.16), who, “when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears” (qtd. in *Grace* 312; sec. 141). Bunyan believes himself to have sinned as Esau did, and therefore none of the promises of God are able to console him. In the same way, the man in the cage cries: “God hath denied me repentance; his Word gives me no encouragement to believe; yea, himself hath shut me up in this Iron Cage . . .” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 30).

Again, this is not to say that Bunyan associates himself with the caged man. The most notable difference between them is that the man in the allegory remains locked in his cage, while Bunyan goes free through the deliverance of God’s promises. However, the words and images with which he describes this character’s experience are highly reminiscent of the ways he chooses to describe his own experience; there can be no doubt that Bunyan is here attempting—whether consciously or unconsciously—to produce in his reader an emotional experience similar to the one he himself experienced.

The sequence of events in Bunyan's struggling with despair are, additionally, themselves highly reminiscent of the image in the Interpreter's House wherein the Devil is pouring water onto the fire of Grace, to quench it, while Christ is pouring oil onto the fire, to keep it alive (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 28). Though Bunyan felt himself afflicted with every temptation to sin and convinced that he could not be saved, Christ continued to work in him toward his eventual assurance of faith.

The similarity between the assaulted fire and Bunyan's self-described experience is both one of the most striking and possibly the hardest to document. Although *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* contains many metaphorical elements, it is clearly not an allegory, and so it contains none of the literary elements that place *The Pilgrim's Progress* so close in form to the early novel. One of its most striking deficits is its failure to follow any sort of dramatic arc that could be described as typical. Bunyan remains in his period of despair, with very little variance, for a massive portion of the book. Additionally, any progress toward character growth one might expect is continually squelched by the same antagonist: the passage condemning Esau. Because these episodes are so frequently repeated, it would be redundant to provide all of them, but one such reads: "Thus was my soul . . . set at liberty from being again afflicted with my former guilt and amazement. But before many weeks were over, I began to despond again . . ." (328; secs. 194-5).

The major difference between the assaulted fire and Bunyan's account is, at first glance that the fire in *The Pilgrim's Progress* appears to be burning despite the Devil's best efforts to quench it, whereas Bunyan's fire (metaphorically speaking, though he

never speaks of it this way) seems to be always out despite his best efforts to kindle it. However, Bunyan held a strong belief in the sovereignty of God, and writes of his final deliverance from despair as if he were a passive participant, for “suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul” (*Grace* 338; sec. 229) and “the Lord did also lead me into the mystery. . .” (*Grace* 339; sec. 233). And despite the fact that Bunyan is clearly wrestling through the Bible passages himself, he states: “Ah, these blessed considerations and scriptures, with many others of a like nature, were in those days made to spangle in mine eyes . . .” (*Grace* 340; sec. 235).

This belief in God’s sovereignty shows that the seeming inconsistency between the ever-burning flame in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Bunyan’s consistent falling away is actually a correlation between the two. Bunyan concludes his autobiography with a description of God’s grace to him, that though there are “to this day seven abominations in my heart . . . I continually see and feel, and am afflicted and oppressed with; yet the wisdom of God doth order them for my good . . .” (*Grace* 367-8; secs. 6-7). The first of Bunyan’s seven abominations is “inclinations to unbelief” (367; sec. 6): the very temptation with which he struggled during his season of despair.

Bunyan viewed his temptation and struggle, not as an account of his being a dead flame, but rather as one of God’s preserving him even when he did not see that it was preservation. If this is the case, the assaulted flame draws deeply upon Bunyan’s emotional experience of what seems to have been the most significant period in his journey to conversion.

Another obvious correlation between Bunyan's allegory and his experience is that between the trial of Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair (*The Pilgrim's Progress* 73-76) and Bunyan's own trial, well-documented by both Harding (74-79) and Harrison (96-103). Bunyan's trial is obviously not the intended meaning which corresponds to the circumstantial meaning of the journeyers' trial, since there is no record of the execution of one of Bunyan's fellow-prisoners. Nonetheless, there is a staggering similarity between the treatment of Faithful by his jury and the treatment Bunyan suffered at the hands of his questioners; the Judge's attempts to show the false mercy and generosity of the court in providing Faithful a forum for his defense closely mirrors the ways in which Sir John Kelynge allowed Bunyan to proclaim his case.

Whether Bunyan was drawing upon his emotional experience of a mocking trial in an attempt to communicate it metaphorically, or merely drawing upon the actual events of his trial as source material for a convincing one in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the similarities between the fictional and historical events demonstrate the likeliness of his utilizing his experience to craft a compelling scene within his fiction.

The greatest connection between the two trials is in the attitudes of Faithful and Bunyan. Faithful's main opposition to the people of Vanity Fair is that their laws are "flat against the Word of God" and thus "opposite to Christianity," that "there can be no divine Faith, without a divine Revelation of the will of God," and that the rulers of the Vanity Fair ought to be in hell (75). Bunyan, meanwhile, states that "Mr. *Foster* of Bedford . . . had ever been a clofe oppofer of the ways of God," seems to oppose Mr. Foster because

of his failure to believe the proper literalness of the Bible, and hints that he considers “Dr. Lindale . . . a fool” (*A Relation* 11, 13-14, 10).

The accusations Faithful receives—“He neither regardeth Prince nor People, Law nor Custom: but doth all that he can to possess all men with certain of his disloyal notions, which he in the general calls Principles of Faith and Holiness” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 74)—are reminiscent of the reasons Bunyan was arrested and put in prison. He refused to attend government-approved church services, arranged meetings where he preached illegally, and did so under the auspices of seeking the faith of those believers to whom he ministered.

The example of the trial, as of the following example, is a good demonstration of a correlation between emotional experiences that is not one-to-one. There are very few distinct parallels between what happens in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Bunyan’s own trial, yet it seems that his experience in the courthouse informed the way he recounts Faithful’s trial. This becomes all the more likely when one considers that Bunyan had a strong memory (Buckland 65) and that he wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress* during his imprisonment as a result of the trial. The memory was likely fresh, especially as he wrote down a vivid account of it in *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*; he probably either had those memories in his head at the time of writing *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, or had his own written account of the trial available for reference.

A final example of correlation between *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Bunyan’s life can perhaps be seen in Christian’s discussion of his family in the Palace Beautiful. This, like the previous example, is a matter largely of extrapolation, yet it demonstrates most

clearly the way in which Bunyan communicated his experiences metaphorically since it holds the least possibility of a one-to-one representational relationship between the fictional account and the historical reality.

When Charity questions Christian regarding his wife and children, Christian breaks into tears, which alongside his actual words demonstrate the depth of his emotion regarding being separated from them. Bunyan reinforces this idea with the marginal gloss, “Christian’s love to his Wife and Children” (*The Pilgrim’s Progress* 42). Accounts of Bunyan’s wife Elizabeth and his children immediately discredit any notion that Christian’s family’s refusal to follow him somehow correlates to Bunyan’s family’s refusal to seek God, as the latter were seemingly as devout as their father. However, the kernel of Christian’s sorrow at the loss of his family resonates with Bunyan’s sorrow at being separated from his wife and children by imprisonment:

the parting with my wife and poor children hath oft been to me in this place, as the pulling the flesh from my bones, and that not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to mind the many hardships, miseries, and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them. (*Grace* 363; sec. 327)

While this is certainly more dramatic than the description Christian gives of how he feels, it seems to match well with the tenor of Christian’s remembering his family.

### **Conclusion**

If these incidents are examples of Bunyan’s informing the writing of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* with his own life experiences, then a greater literary work is being



done in that allegory than the mere didactic communication of a conceptual framework that most people associate with allegory.

While this thesis has attempted to demonstrate throughout that allegory is richer than many literary conventions assume, the presence of a metaphorical relationship between the circumstantial meaning of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Bunyan's own life experiences (in addition to the allegorical correlation between the circumstantial meaning and the intended meaning) means that Bunyan is working on a higher level than simply the didactic within *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

This higher level of literary work has given *The Pilgrim's Progress* its lasting appeal and readability. The work holds more emotional, theological, and literary significance than a simple allegory for the Christian life would ordinarily hold, because it is also a literary artifact by which Bunyan communicates key moments of his own experience on the journey of faith that he fictionalized in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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